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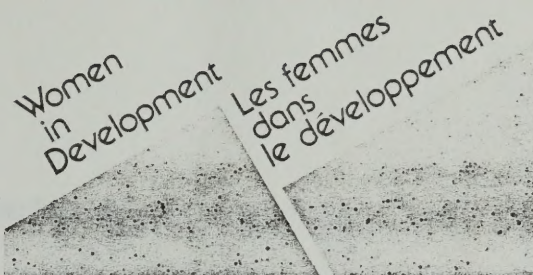
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WOMEN, WATER AND SANITATION

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WOMEN, WATER AND SANITATION

The Present Situation

Adequate clean water supply is one of the basic necessities for the survival of life on earth. Both developed and developing nations suffer from the threat to global water supply and water purity. It is one of the most critical development problems. Over one half of all people, most of them living in the rural areas and urban slums of developing countries, lack safe drinking water. According to UNICEF News, only 25 per cent of urban and less than 10 per cent of rural Third World people are close to a supply of clean, safe water. Three quarters of the global population does not have any basic sanitation (1).

Women in developing countries are the universal water carriers, spending between one and four hours a day in water collection. After that they spend many hours transporting it on their heads or backs in heavy pots and buckets. In some cases, this has caused spinal injuries. Women decide where they will go to collect water in the rainy season, and where they can still find some water during the dry season. They also judge how often and how much they will collect at a time, how they will store, use and re-use water and what to do with the eventual waste. Analysis of women's water use patterns shows that source selection is a rational process for which a number of important factors have to be balanced against each other, such as time, taste, and cleanliness. The source is also a meeting point for local women to discuss their communal concerns (2).

The consequences of poor supplies of water and sanitation are very serious. According to the World Health Organization, water related diseases count for 80 per cent of all diseases in developing countries (3). Unsafe water can carry bacteria leading to deadly diseases such as typhoid and hepatitis. Parasites are transmitted directly by drinking unclean water, infesting the body with bilharzia, guinea worms and hook worms. Insects carrying malaria, sleeping sickness and yellow fever breed in water close to the habitation of many slum dwellers. Leprosy, scabies and trachoma are spread by inadequate water supply for personal washing. It is estimated that more than 15 million children below the age of five die in the Third World each year due to water related diseases.

Deforestation, desertification, pollution and overpopulation are additional factors compelling women and female children to spend an ever increasing amount of time looking for and carrying safe water. This interferes with schooling and income-generating work. It also contributes to women's work overload and chronic exhaustion.

In some urban areas, much of the family income is spent on water purchased from vendors, who often sell polluted water (5). Water related diseases are linked to high infant mortality rates which in turn contribute to high population growth. Women who lose several small children to disease will not easily adopt family planning measures.

Past Achievements

The vital relationship between women and water was reaffirmed by the international community at the 1980 World Conference of the UN Decade for Women. This conference passed a resolution declaring the 1980 -1990 decade "International Drinking Water Supply and Sanitation Decade". The resolution calls on member states and United Nations Agencies to promote full participation of women in planning, implementation and application of technology for water supply and related projects.

At the World Health Assembly in 1982, Canada announced that it would contribute approximately \$300 million to reach the goal of providing safe drinking water and adequate sanitation for all people by 1990. Programs emphasize low-cost, accessible and appropriate technology and a high degree of local input in testing various pump systems, latrine designs and hygiene/sanitary training packages.

Many other similar programs and projects have been started in this decade. Private development organizations such as CARE can draw on long standing experience with water supply and sanitation projects. This experience is continuously shared and refined in cooperation with other governmental, UN and private organizations. Women's participation in these projects is an official recognition of the important place they have always occupied in these fields.

The United Nations Development Programme, for example, is currently implementing a large-scale project aimed at supporting the global effort to develop water supply and sanitation systems. The ultimate goal of the project is to enable participating countries to provide safe water supplies and adequate sanitation facilities for most of their people by 1990. The project places special emphasis on promoting and supporting women's participation. For example, it is establishing a sound information base documenting how women can be successfully recruited, supported and trained for responsible participation in water supply and sanitation schemes.

Barriers to Full Participation of Women in Water Projects

Even where efforts have been made to involve women in water supply and utilization projects, a number of structural and cultural factors have impeded their effectiveness as participants and executors.

When women face conflicting demands on their time and have to make choices, they often will trade off the volunteer work associated with planning and implementing community projects for spending more time on domestic or income-earning activities. In most societies, for example, younger women are not free to spend much time outside their homes because of their family responsibilities and lack of adequate child care services. Older women, after many years of hard labour, often are not strong enough to take on some of the more strenuous tasks, such as travelling long distances on bicycles.

While women's roles in management, decision-making and maintenance work of traditional water supply sources and in sanitation activities is nothing new, the informal character of the arrangements and the tendency of both the women and the local leaders to keep these activities on an informal basis keep their roles hidden. In turn, development agency programmes also reflect this situation when women do receive an active and responsible role in water projects. In some instances, husbands do not respect their wives' new status, undermining their ability to carry out their new responsibilities in a number of ways. For example, in one sanitation project in Ghana, the husbands of female education workers appropriated their wives' bicycles for their own use. And the wives, not used to contradicting their husbands, did little to get them back. On the village level also, women often encounter non-acceptance and lack of confidence.

Sometimes industrialization contributes to a high level of water pollution, especially where no adequate waste disposal policies have been set. This may rob many Third World people of their livelihood by destroying ocean and inland fishing industries.

Future Action

- * Experience and research over the last ten years have shown that involving women in the planning and implementation of water and sanitation projects can frequently determine the success of the projects. New initiatives to involve women by freeing them of some of their other tasks and compensating them financially must be tried, and information must be shared.
- * Water and sanitation measures are only truly efficient if they complement each other. The users must be educated in the proper use of equipment and facilities. Development agencies must continue to recognize the importance of education about water usage as a key component of water supply and sanitation projects.
- * Women have to be consulted when new pumps and other equipment are being introduced. They need to be trained in maintenance and repair tasks.
- * Water pump designs which are unsuitable for women and children may lead to inefficient use, causing damage and eventual breakdown (6).
- * Women must be involved with the selection of new well sites. If new water sources are inaccessible or too far removed, they will not be used properly.
- * Women must be seen as a resource for the ongoing evaluation of every water supply, well installation and maintenance, and every sanitation project.

Footnotes

1. Women, Environment and Water, UNEP, Nairobi, 1980.
2. "The Involvement of Women as a Factor in Project Success in the Drinking Water Supply and Sanitation Sector", OECD-DAC Paper, April 1985.
3. WHO Press Release, 23, 19 Nov. 1980.
4. Cooperation in Water Supply and Sanitation Programmes, UNICEF, November 1980, p. 1.
5. Some Social and Cultural Aspects of Rural Water Supply, Kirsten Jorgensen, Centre for Development Research, Copenhagen 1981, (Project Paper D.81.14.)
6. "Piped Dream: Providing Water for Rural Communities in Sri Lanka", Kenneth J. Somanader, UNICEF News, No. 83, 1975.

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